



# 2003 IN REVIEW

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Craig Bihle

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The North Dakota Game and Fish Department experienced a successful year in 2003, but not without encountering a few bumps in the trail along the way. Many challenges arose as alterations in hunting season structure and licensing requirements for nonresidents, passed during the 2003 legislative session, required Department personnel to spend considerable time dealing with issues new to the hunting scene in the state.

Even so, it was a good year, with new challenges and opportunities on the horizon in 2004.

**GOOD BASE AND GROWTH**

Game and Fish is one of the country's few wildlife agencies to experience growth based on income generated by licenses sales.

Nationwide, the number of active hunters and anglers is declining, but not so in North Dakota. Many state wildlife agencies, unlike Game and Fish, receive general tax monies to supplement their department operations. Many of those states have experienced either stagnated budgets or cutbacks because of budget shortfalls.

The Department's biennial budget was expanded significantly during the last legislative session, growing by 16.3 percent. This new budget will exceed projected revenues, which will reduce the Game and Fish fund. The fund is currently at about \$25 million. We are mandated by state law to have at least \$10 million in reserve.

Identified in the legislative budgeting process was the need to increase hunting access on private lands and expand the Department's game warden force. Game and Fish is in the process of adding additional game wardens, and a position responsible for commercial hunting and fishing activities has been created. Our Private Lands Initiative program is now the largest project within the Department. Not only were personnel added and funding increased, but a goal was set to increase access on 1 million acres of privately-owned, quality hunting land by 2008.

Department revenues have been growing consistently for the past decade primarily because of increased resident and nonresident license sales and increases in federal funds and excise taxes collected on a variety of products purchased by hunters and anglers. Maintaining revenue growth for the future, however, may be difficult. At some point, significant reductions are likely, based on natural climatic cycles. We got a preview of this in 2003 with dry conditions in wetlands and other waters in North Dakota critical to waterfowl.

It is difficult to envision much growth in resident hunter numbers unless we experience overall population gains in North Dakota. In the case of future deer license sales, the Department's revised goal for deer populations will result in decreased deer license sales from current record numbers.

For a variety of reasons, including negative reaction to nonresident hunter legislation, changes in regulations and dry conditions, the sale of nonresident licenses have dropped slightly. The revenue lost from this slight dip will be more than recovered in revenue generated by the change in fee structures made by lawmakers, and increases in resident license sales.

## ACCESSING PRIVATE LAND

The Department's commitment to improving habitat and hunter access on private land continues to grow. Since its inception in 1979, the Private Lands Initiative program has evolved from a deer depredation program, with a small contingent of habitat and access projects, to the largest group of projects within the Department. Depredation prevention is still a core activity, but in recent years, habitat and access provisions have been expanded to meet the public's appetite for access to quality wildlife habitat on private land. Although this state has always had a reserved view of public land ownership, \$500,000 for land acquisition of special areas was approved during the last legislative session. This is the first time in recent years the Department has had a significant land acquisition budget.

## DROUGHT

The old saying, "Whiskey is for drinking and water is for fighting over," rings true when it comes to water in the Missouri River. Starting in 1993, most of North Dakota experienced above average precipitation, leading to expansion of prairie lakes to levels never witnessed in the past century. In the past couple of years most of the waters have receded some, but they are still high. Quite the opposite is the case for the upper Missouri watershed. Fort Peck, Lake Sakakawea and Lake Oahe, the three main upstream Missouri River reservoirs, are experiencing alarmingly low water levels, thus endangering their fisheries and associated recreational industry.

The Game and Fish Department is just one of many state agencies, in several upper basin states, struggling with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers over Missouri River

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management, and we will continue to provide research and key data to ensure North Dakota receives appropriate consideration in future water management decisions. Meanwhile, the Game and Fish has committed to an aggressive approach to maintaining adequate resources to ensure access to the Missouri River System.

## UNUSUAL ANIMALS

The number of unusual animal sightings in North Dakota is on the rise. Sightings of river otters and fishers are interesting side notes, but do not require immediate action. The frequency of reports and interactions with large carnivores such as mountain lions, black bears and wolves will require management decisions in the future. The return of extirpated species has always been an exciting facet of wildlife management, but the reality of why these animals disappeared from North Dakota leads to management decisions of how well they will now fit into a changed landscape.

## DISEASES AND EXOTIC SPECIES

Surveillance for chronic wasting disease, a brain malady that kills wild and farmed deer and elk, continued in North Dakota in 2003. More than 1,500 deer heads were collected from hunters in the southern half of the state to be tested for CWD in a laboratory in Wyoming. Results of those tests are expected sometime in early 2004. To date, scientists have not diagnosed CWD in wild or farmed deer or elk in North Dakota.

Epizootic hemorrhagic disease, a naturally occurring virus spread by a biting midge, killed a number of white-tailed deer in southwest North Dakota last year, prompting Game and Fish officials to reduce the number of tags sold to hunters. This decision was not because of a widespread whitetail population reduction, but because of moderate to significant losses in isolated areas that might have affected hunting success in those locations. The last severe EHD outbreak occurred in 2000, when the disease tracked south of Interstate 94 and west of the Missouri River.

Efforts to fight the spread or introduction of unwelcome aliens – curly leaf pondweed, zebra mussel, purple loosestrife, to name a few – in North Dakota continued last year. Much attention was given to saltcedar, a troubling invader that has taken root along the Missouri River System and beyond in the state. The Game and Fish, North Dakota Department of Agriculture, local weed



*Heading into 2004, Missouri River management is a major concern for all North Dakotans. While dwindling water levels in lakes Sakakawea and Oahe have made it difficult to maintain boating access, of equal or greater concern is how current low water will influence rainbow smelt in Sakakawea. If low water induces a smelt die-off, game fish in the lake – walleye, northern pike and salmon – will fair poorly.*

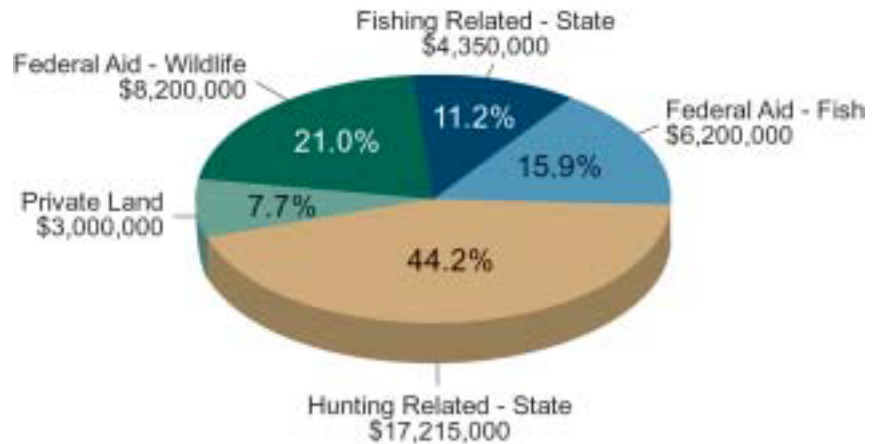
Craig Bhirle

boards, and others continue to search and destroy saltcedar where it is found. When grown, the exotic plant may form dense groves of plants several feet high and several acres in size. The rub is that saltcedar pulls salt from the soil and transfers it from its leaves back onto the ground, hindering native plants from taking root.

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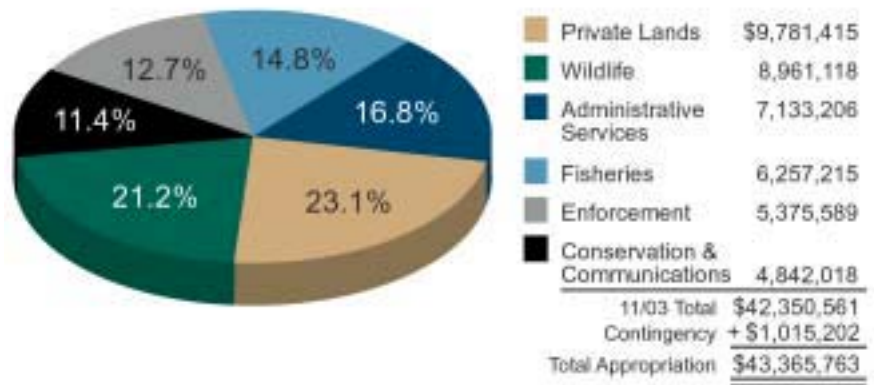
## 2003-2005 Revenue Projection

ND Game and Fish Department



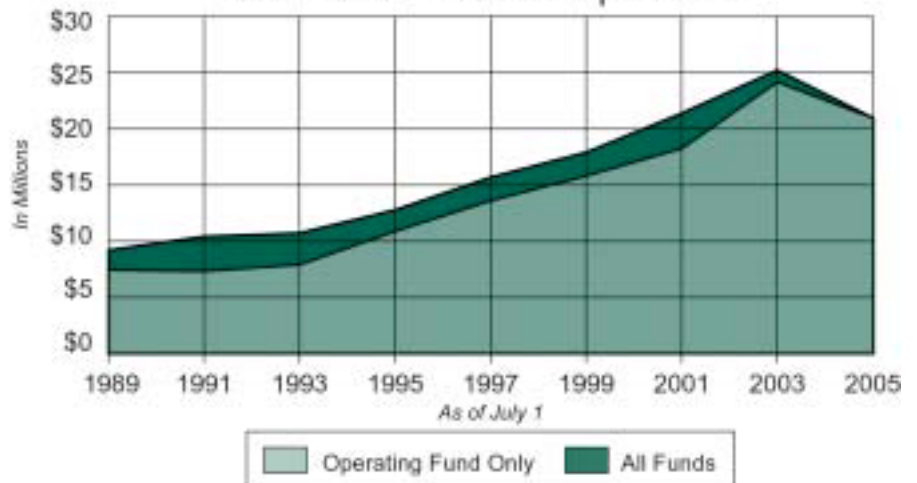
## 2003-2005 Division Budgets

ND Game and Fish Department



## Fund Balances

ND Game and Fish Department



## DEPARTMENT PLANNING

Last year, I reported that we were in the process of updating the Department's plan. We envisioned that this would involve current programs and simply updating goals and objectives. However, when we got started, it was determined that our plan was not serving its intended purpose for staff or the public. Major revisions were necessary, not to make it longer or more complex, but to make it more straight forward and usable by all. This process is evolving satisfactorily.

## INTERIM STUDIES

Details from the 2003 legislative session were highlighted in past issues of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*. While 2004 is an off year, there is still legislative activity in the form of interim studies. Last biennium during the interim there were two major studies involving Game and Fish issues concerning nonresident regulation and elk in and around Theodore Roosevelt National Park. This interim there is only one issue scheduled for study and that is proposed legislation permitting the Game and Fish Department to coordinate with game and fish programs conducted by tribal governments.

## FUTURE CONCERNS

Two areas directly under government control that have the potential to greatly affect fish and wildlife populations of North Dakota are management of the Missouri River System, and the federal Farm Bill, or specifically, conservation provisions such as the Conservation Reserve Program.

Future Missouri River System management is of great concern to North Dakota, not only for its fish and wildlife, but for the state's economy and quality of life. Currently, the turf battle is over downstream barge traffic and upstream recreational economics. But this is only a precursor to the division of a limited water source for municipal and industrial expansion, agriculture and other needs. A portion of North Dakota's future is at stake.

More acres of wildlife habitat in North Dakota are affected by the Farm Bill than possibly any other function of government. Last year in my annual report I said the new farm program looked very promising for wildlife of this state. Well, the devil is in the details. Although there were significant national expansions in overall conservation provisions, North Dakota may not fair as well as in the past. Currently, North Dakota has more than 3 million acres of land enrolled in

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*Conservation Reserve Program land is at least partly responsible for the improved pheasant, duck and deer hunting North Dakotans have experienced the past several years. Maintaining this program is essential to sustaining current hunting opportunities.*

CRP. In the most recent CRP signup, 250,119 acres were offered for enrollment; however, only 21,326 acres were accepted. This in itself may not be overly alarming because the number of acres scheduled to come out of enrollment was about 25,000 acres. Acceptance rates of previous signups were about 45 percent versus 8.5 percent in this signup. So, percentage-wise, the overall loss was not that significant, unless you were one of the individuals trying to enroll.

There has been a general rewrite of conservation provisions that now seem to favor other parts of the country more than the Northern Plains. The concern is that rules for future enrollment will continue to change, decreasing resources available for conservation in North Dakota. Already, practices such as Conservation Practice 23, currently comprising about 769,573 acres, have been limited to a statewide allocation of just 1,000 acres for 2004.

The debate over whether 3 million acres of CRP is too much or whether we have too many nonresident hunters may become mute in 2007 when approximately 1.5 million acres of CRP contracts expire without any assurance or provisions for reenrollment or replacement.

To steal a phrase from a television commercial: "For a small outfit, we had a pretty big year."